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DEPARTMENT FOR CA/OCS/CI, CA/VO AND AF/W

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SUBJECT: EMBASSY DISCUSSES INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIONS WITH GOL
OFFICIALS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador, DCM and Conoffs discussed problem areas in international adoptions and made recommendations to strengthen adoption procedures in Liberia during a luncheon hosted by the Ambassador for senior GOL officials and the UNICEF Officer-In-Charge. After an animated and friendly discussion, Liberian officials agreed on several measures that should improve adoption procedures in Liberia, including implementing Hague convention measures, requiring a residency period for prospective adopting parents, and using increased fees to cover government services related to adoption. As the number of adoptions is rising rapidly in Liberia, there is definite concern that safeguards be reinforced to prevent possible trafficking of children. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Guests at the November 16 luncheon and discussion hosted by the Ambassador included: Dr. Walter Gwenigale, Minister of Health and Social Welfare; Joseph Geebro, Deputy Minister of Health and Social Welfare; Honorable Varbah Gayflor, Minister of Gender and Development (Protection of women's rights); Judge Vinton Holder, Supreme Court of Liberia; Ms. Fatuma Hamidali Ibrahim, Officer-in-Charge UNICEF and Ms. Elizabeth Williams, John Snow International Fellow, seconded to the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. Also in attendance were DCM, Consul and Vice Consul.

¶3. (SBU) Consul provided an overview of adoption issues. International adoptions in Liberia have grown exponentially in the past five years. The Embassy's consular section issued a mere 23 immigrant visas in the orphan category in 2002, but over 350 in FY ¶2007. This number does not reflect the number of adoptions by naturalized Liberians under Section 201(b) IR-2, child of an American citizen. Thus the total number of adoption visas issued in the last fiscal year exceeded 400 immigrant visas. Post not only sees adopted children bound for the U.S. as children of American citizens but also adopted children of V92's Follow-to-join, Diversity Visa derivatives, K-3's and IR-2 step-child of an American citizen. The entire country is abuzz with the phenomenon of children seen boarding planes every week for America. The question often heard is whether the Government of Liberia and the U.S. Embassy have safeguards in place to prevent trafficking of children by way of the adoption process.

¶4. (SBU) The GOL officials said they were aware that more safeguards need to be implemented. Consul pointed out that in recent months four cases had been identified which the person who relinquished parental custody of a child or children for adoptions was not the biological parent. In all cases the children had living parents who were not aware their children had been adopted. One adopting parent wrote an e-mail to the Embassy requesting that her seven year-old adopted daughter be returned to Liberia as she felt her child is unable to "live in a normal household". An American mother stated that her adopted children told her that the person who relinquished parental custody for adoption was not their biological parent and the "brother" who accompanied her daughter is neither the daughter's biological sibling nor had they ever lived together. The child was subsequently placed in foster care in Washington State.

The parent said ten other families in her state who adopted from one particular orphanage in Liberia were "shuffling their children from place to place with other family members" due to similar problems.

15. (SBU) Consul noted that consular officers, as often as possible, closely interview the birth parent to be as certain as possible that he/she understands what it means to relinquish all parental authority and allow his/her child to be adopted. When there is doubt about the relationship, consular officers have conducted DNA testing to confirm the parent/child relationship.

16. (SBU) The Minister of Health and Social Welfare said his office is understaffed and overworked. Social workers are unable to conduct on sight investigations of the parents who provide relinquishment of parental authority which is a prerequisite for the child to be placed for adoption due to lack of staff and resources. He indicated his officers lacked cars and fuel for transportation to the interior of the country where the majority of children come from. Additionally, he said many children languish in sub-standard, unregulated orphanages that the Ministry is in the process of closing. A fellow from John Snow International has been seconded to the Ministry to assist with development and implementation of a national social welfare plan, but it will be some time before the plan is finalized, much less properly resourced. A Circuit Court judge who is the sole signatory of adoption decrees in Liberia echoed sentiments of the Minister.

17. (SBU) The panel agreed to the following recommendations in order to strengthen the adoption process in Liberia:

1. Although Liberia is not a member of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, The Ministry of Justice will take steps to gain accession to the Convention. Currently, there is no regulatory oversight of adoption agencies operating in Liberia.

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2. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare will impose a residency requirement, possibly one month, for prospective adopting parents.

3. The Ministry of Health and Social Welfare will increase adoption fees in order to be able to employ more social workers to conduct proper adoption investigations.

18. (SBU) Subsequent to the luncheon, the Chief Justice confirmed to the Ambassador his intention issue decrees to require that international adoptions be approved only after the receiving country has approved the adoption, and impose a residency requirement. In addition, the Supreme Court will increase adoption fees in order to cover costs of increasing demand for services

19. (SBU) Comment. Even as the GOL begins to take measures to improve its international adoption policies, the Embassy continues to deal with the consequences of poorly managed adoptions. In our most recent case, three children adopted by an American couple have since abandoned their children in Liberia to the orphanage that facilitated the adoption. The adopting mother is currently jailed in California and will soon stand trial for the murder of a child she adopted in the U.S. The adopting father brought the three children adopted from Liberia along with four African-American children previously adopted in the United States. We are also aware of two additional cases of adoption disruption. One child involved in a disrupted adoption has been re-adopted in the U.S. The Embassy does not have information on the whereabouts of the second child. The Embassy remains concerned that unless the GOL takes decisive steps to control adoptions, more children will find themselves in unacceptable circumstances verging on trafficking.
End Comment

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